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Like a Shady Tree for Those in Trouble

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Like
a shady tree for those
in trouble.

Experiences of war and
hopes for peace of people
living amidst violent conflict
in Kachin State, Myanmar

This booklet is one of the outputs of a research project that was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK (project reference: AH/N008464/1). It was conducted by a research team composed of three artists and civil society activists from Myanmar and three academics working in the United Kingdom and the United States of America.



Research team

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Inspired by

DrawingOut (<https://drawingout.org>)

In partnership with

Nonviolent Peaceforce Myanmar



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ABERYSTWYTH
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Arts & Humanities
Research Council

What this booklet is about

The content

The experiences of war and hopes for peace of ordinary women and men living their lives amidst violent conflict in Kachin state, Myanmar, using their own words and artwork.

The people involved

A group of four women and seven men who self-identify as ethnic Kachin and live in Kachin state, Myanmar. Of these eleven participants, nine were living in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) at the time of the workshop.

The workshop activities

Over the course of three days, we first conducted a series of drawing exercises to help participants become more comfortable with expressing themselves through art (e.g. how to use forms and colours to express feelings). We then held thematic drawing and story-sharing sessions, designed to prompt our participants to share their experiences of life amidst violent conflict and their hopes and ideas for a peaceful future. What does it feel and sound like to live amidst violent conflict? What does your community look like at present? What has been your greatest fear? Which metaphor best describes who you are or strive to be? What does your ethnic identity mean to you? What has been the happiest moment of your life? Participants also shared stories beyond these drawings with each other and talked about their upbringing and life amidst violent conflict. We finished the workshop with the questions “What makes you peaceful, and what makes your community peaceful?”, which participants reflected on while drawing and printing leaves.

The main conclusions

The participants talked about

- Their fears arising from the physical threats they face in their everyday lives in the Kachin conflict zone, for example when they hear sounds of battles, encounter members of the Burmese military or the Kachin Independence Army or have to travel along mined roads and through armed checkpoints;
- The challenges of life amidst violent conflict, especially challenges of life as an internally displaced person (IDP), of getting an education and earning a living, and the impact the war has had on their life plans;
- What peace means and would look like for them and their communities;
- How they see their own role in their communities;
- How some of them have organised and protected themselves from violence in the past and present;
- What makes them happy in the midst of violence.

Civilians experiencing war and displacement

“At dawn people were cooking their breakfast in the village. Suddenly, the bullets rained down. Some people died immediately. I carried my youngest brother on my back. Dad was not at home; he was at the farm. Mom held my younger brother. We went to hide behind bamboos. Bullets fell near the bamboos. We fled the whole day and felt starving.”



“On the Myanmar side, we are frightened by guns and mines. On the China side, we are forced and driven out. We are not humans, we are just garbage.”

“Suddenly combat started. Guns were fired from here and there. We fled again and hid inside an old school. There were around seven people in our group. It was just after dusk. There was a six-month-old baby.

We could see Burmese soldiers marching up. The baby was crying. The father cradled his child but the child did not stop crying. So he shut his child's mouth by putting his hand over it. When the Burmese soldiers had passed without noticing us, an older woman touched the baby. But the baby had stopped breathing.”

“Arms fall onto some villages around us that night. The more we run, the louder the sounds of explosion. Without anything, we had to sleep and stay by the path for a week. We welcomed the new year by the path.”

“We were not allowed to cross the river. The Burmese military attacked the Kachin Independence Army using air-fighter jets near our former village. ... Women from the village suggested to get shelter at the IDP Camp. Later we decided to follow our women and children, determined to face whatever violent abuses we might encounter.”



"I joined the military training in parachuting. I even participated as a paratrooper showing my parachuting skills at the Army Day ceremony."



"We have to fight back and struggle for our rights."



"Finally, I was also taken to the war front. I had to serve at the frontline for one month, which was much more heart-stopping than an adventure movie."

"I never supported any war, or any side, as I don't like to see neither Kachin nor Burmese soldiers die in battle. I am very sad that the war is ongoing."

"The day I resigned from the military service I was overjoyed."

The sound of war

"The noise repeating in my ears.
Good sounds, bad sounds.
I listen and hear.
I hear the good and the bad.
Gunshots and exploding mines."



"I heard the explosion."

"I am afraid of the arms and explosion sounds."

"I am hearing mine explosions all the time."



Encountering armed groups

"The Tatmadaw asked us, the village administrators, to deliver their message to the Kachin Independence Army: 'Tell them that we are approaching so they better leave.' The KIA responded: 'Tell them not to approach.'"

I was delivering messages from one side to the other, shivering with fear. A gunshot by any side could be fired at any time. I asked both sides to let me get out of that situation; neither side did."



"It is not easy for young IDPs. When the KIA finds them, they are checked and recruited to be KIA soldiers. When the Tatmadaw finds them, they are detained. They are forced to serve for the military and if they resist, the military accuses them of violating the Unlawful Association Act."

"One night, gunmen kicked at the door, hit the wall before they got in. They aimed their guns at us. I was frightened. I thought they would kill me right there."

They grabbed my dad. As dad could speak Burmese, he explained to them about his family responsibilities. So they let him stay but took the other men from the village for portering."

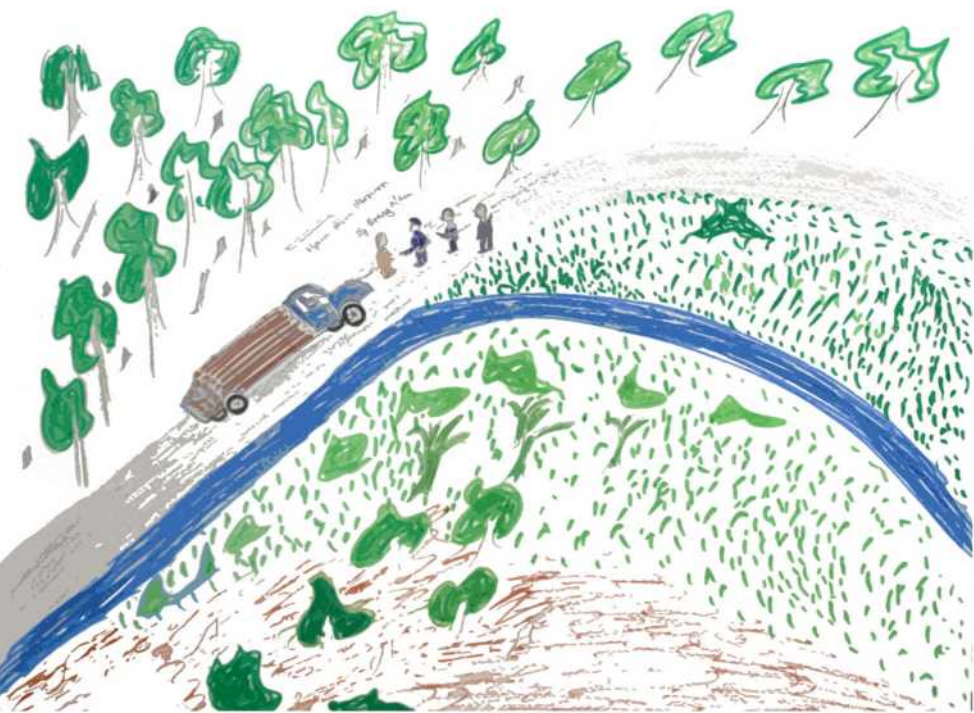


"In 2013, while he was in the village, my other younger brother was taken by a KIA troop to the frontline, and he died in the battle. Maybe the soldiers asked him to carry some loads."

"They exploded bombs, a little here and a little there. Soon, innocent IDPs were taken to be sent to jail. My father was one of those who were taken to jail on such accusation. The accused IDPs were not the real ones who exploded the bridge. It has been five years that they are in jail."



"What I fear most is that I do something wrong to a soldier by mistake."



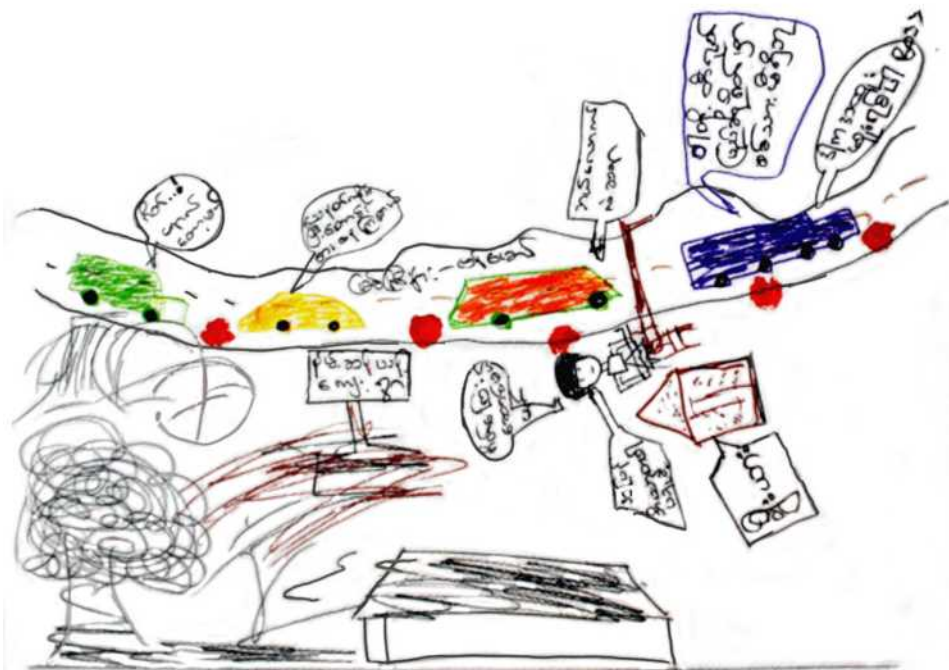
Travelling in a conflict zone

“I am afraid of the bullets and the sounds of gunfire, which are shot at random or from somewhere. That’s what I fear most. We have to do business for a living. We have to go for work at far away places sometimes or at nearby places. It is occasional.”

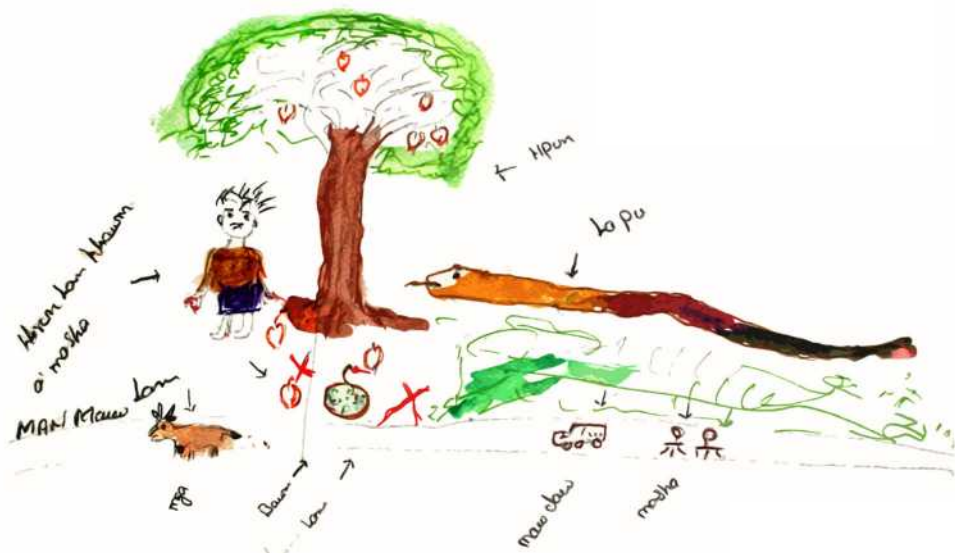
“I traded bicycles with Chinese businessmen. On one trading trip, I experienced an airstrike by the Tatmadaw above the road.”

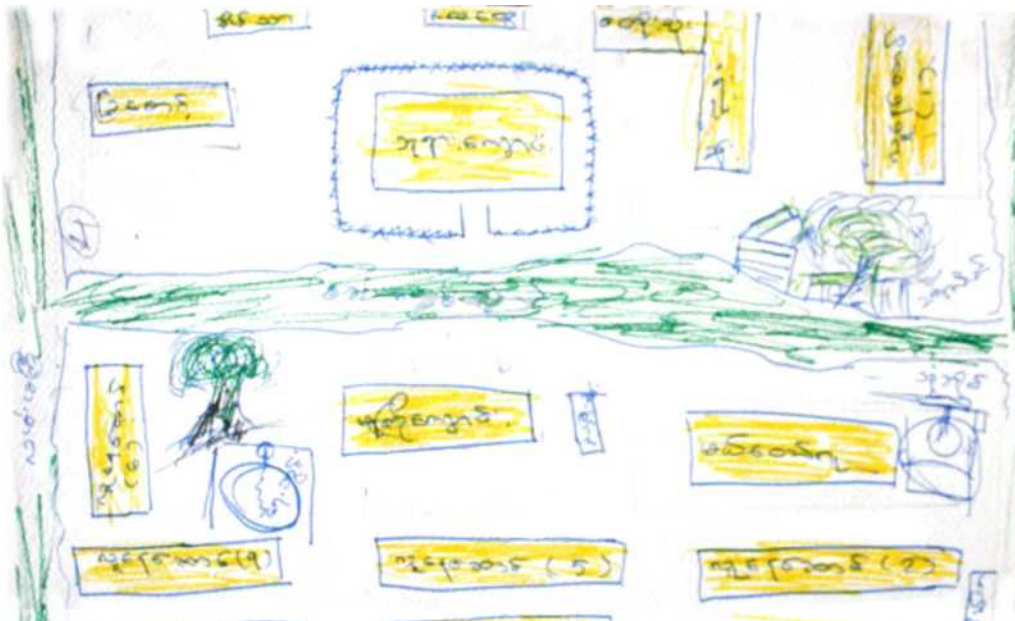
“Because of the insecurity, we are not able to be mobile even for making a living or trading. There is no security in the surrounding, but only enemies.”

“We are really afraid when approaching the tollgates. At the gates, there are Tatmadaw soldier guards. We can be in danger within a minute, our lives threatened, asked for money, or inquired.”



"In the village, I have my Christian fellows. I visit them regularly, because it is my responsibility to take care of them, no matter how hard the situation is. One month ago, the Burmese Army built a new base; on the other side of the river near the village is a KIA base. If the two armies clash, travellers like us can be gone."





Life in an IDP camp

“This is my IDP camp. The hut is too small for me to stand upright or move around.”

“Each accommodation is very tight and there is no privacy or freedom. We have to live alongside others who we had never known before in our lives.”

“This is the toilet. It is very close to the kitchen space where we cook rice and curry. The smell is so bad.”

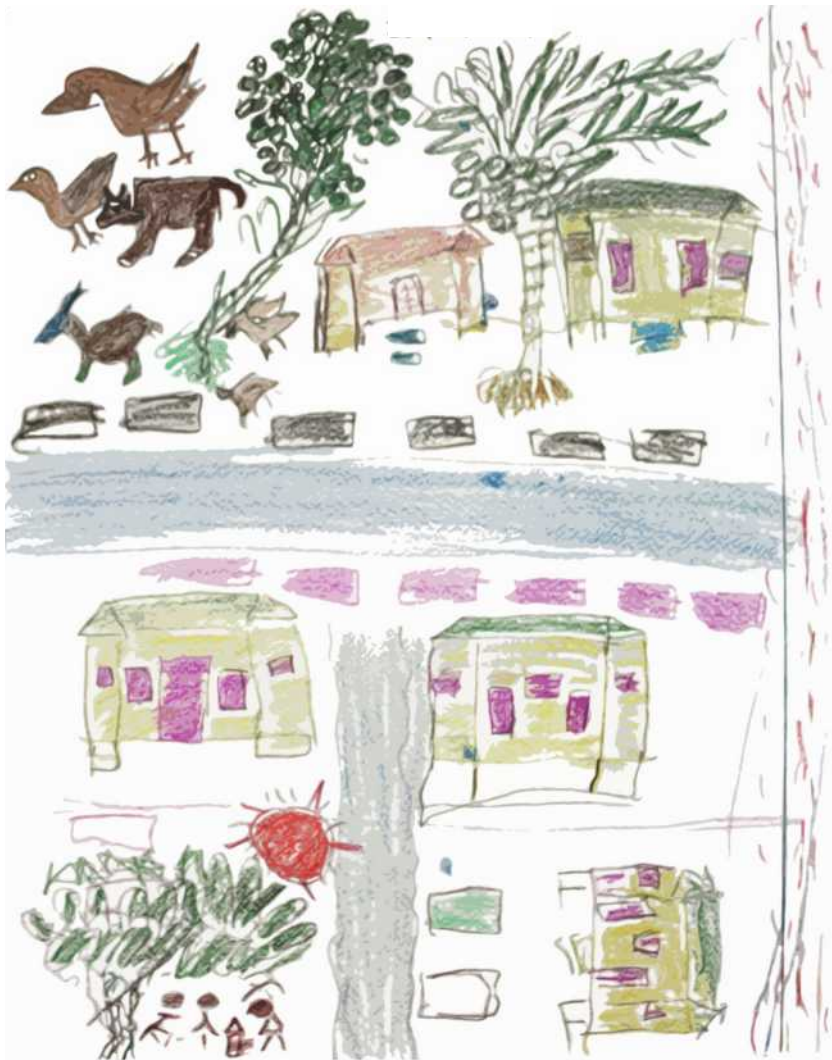
“When the weather is very hot, we cannot stay at the accommodation because it is very hot inside and we cannot breathe.”

“We have been surviving with the help of international aid. But one month's ration is sometimes not enough and runs out before the month ends.”

“We are in trouble. It is impossible to be dependent on ourselves. Have we ever asked something from the government before the war resumed?”

“At the other side of the road, there is a battalion basecamp. Of course, we are very scared, because when things get worse politically, they shoot. Their target is somewhere in the orders they receive; however, the target direction always aims at our camp.”

“It is very difficult to build a future.”

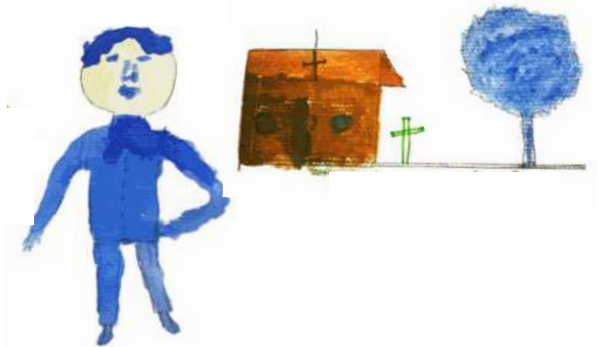


How violent conflict impacts on life plans

"I cannot achieve what I had planned before."

"My plan to study to get an official degree from the Myanmar government was damaged because of the war. I was on my way to Myitkyina, for an appointment with a university administrator, to discuss about enrolment and other things. On the way, there was a bridge and it was bombed, so the bus could not pass. The police checked my ID card and kept it. They said it was expired and I needed to get a new one. So I could not travel."

"If one graduated from such a KIA school, one could become KIA soldier and be promoted to higher ranks within a few years of service. When I stopped schooling, I went to the KIO's office to explain the reason, my family's difficulties. They told me to serve as a village school teacher, if I could not be a soldier. So I went back to the village and worked as a teacher."



"I could not afford to go to Baptist theological school; KIO gave me a scholarship to study medicine. Upon recommendation of a local priest, I finally went to study at the theological school, but without taking any clothes or bedding. Because had I gone back to my family's village, the KIO officers would have come to get me and send me to medical school."

"I am a refugee now. I am happy that I am alive, however, I am not free to do what I want. I cannot get the opportunities or rights which I should have. So I feel deeply despaired."



Challenges of getting an education

“We had to flee because of an offensive attack by the Tatmadaw. It was three weeks before the start of the school season. Me and my siblings hid in the jungle and stayed there for three years, so we were not able to study.”

“My high school student life was difficult. I sold goods in the school compound before the classes started. After school, I went to pickle vegetables and brought them to the market very early. I earned my school fee from that.”



“Mother died early and father was a drug addict. So, I had not chance to go to school anymore. With difficulty, I studied and finished middle school at a KIA school. After middle school, I dreamt to go to high school in that coming year. But there was nobody to take care of home. I had to quit school.”

“I had no chance to continue schooling. Mom was alone at home to take care of my father who was sick. My elder brother had to serve in the KIA army. I quit school to help Mom with household works. I did not finish third grade. I was growing up while fleeing away from war.”



“I had to leave home and live far away for my schooling. When I quit school, I had to travel to find a job and make money. I have never been with my family. I quit school after failing the high school final exam three times.”

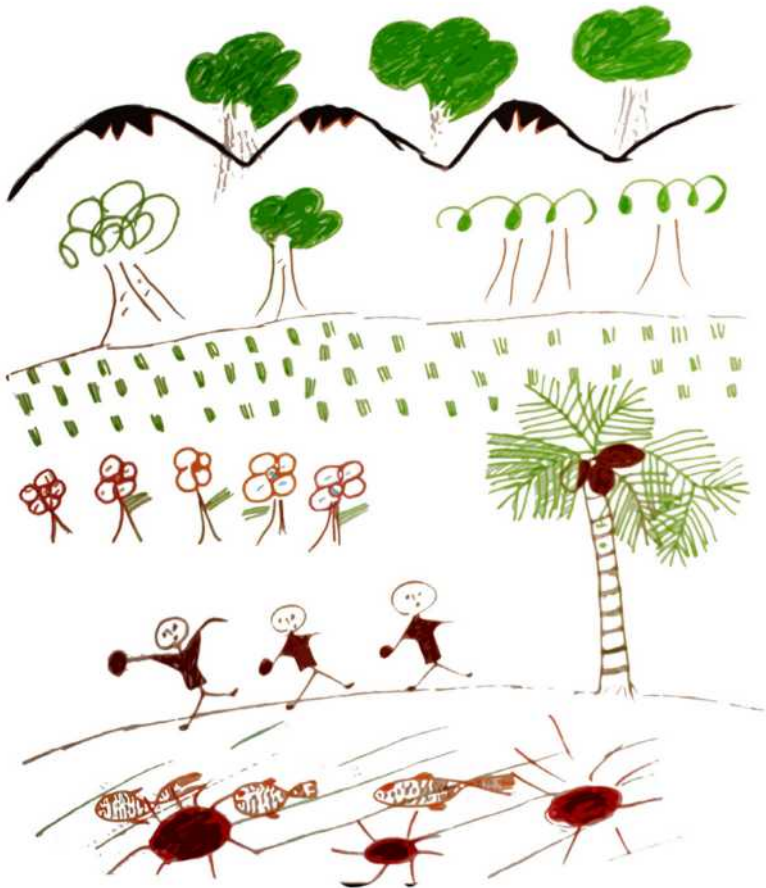
“My reason to move to this IDP Camp is that I want my children not to be like me. I want them to be educated. My friends who went to school, who got education, got a job in the town. They won't need to flee from war.”

Challenges of earning a living

“We used to be farmers, who were skilful in the forests, in the mountains, and on the farms. But now we had to abandon our homes and skills; we have no skill to make a living in a town.”

“In my native region, Tatmadaw troops came to our farm almost every day. If we had not harvested when the soldiers arrived, we had to eat boiled bamboo shoots or banana stems.”

“With the help of the headman of the village, we were able to do farming. He said, ‘As your family is in trouble, let’s work together.’ But after the land was worked and ready for ploughing, the landowners came and told us that it was not possible anymore for them to allow us to do farming on their land.”



“Just before school enrolment season opened, I sold drugs twice to make my kids’ school fees. The third time selling drugs I got arrested and was imprisoned.”

“I was a teacher but was not paid any salary.”

“We are not allowed to go out of the camp for business matters. It is not safe to go out or travel alone, especially if you are a girl. There are landmine explosions, or you can be in the middle of a sudden war outbreak at any time.”

“Some cannot go to work because of poor transportation.”

“Urban people don’t like to employ IDPs. Most employers are afraid that IDP employees will move away or that they will not be able to work for the full contract term.”

“I went to work at the jade mines, but there were many soldiers involved with the mining companies; we could not work at our own will. I gave up hope I could work for a proper income.”

“When I was young, I learnt some skills in carpentering and masonry. So I cooperated with a friend to do small-scale construction projects for individual housings.”

“Before, I traded amber to China’s gem market. On the way across the Chinese border, I was arrested twice. Both times, the border guards took away all my belongings and merchandise. I invested in those amber stones partially with my own money and partially with the money I borrowed from somebody. I have just repaid that money.”

What makes me and my community peaceful

Equality and solidarity

Equal rights and opportunities for all ethnicities
Mutual respect
Understanding
Good will
Neighbourly support
Support and understanding between generations



An end to warfare

An end to the fighting
Everyday peace
No more weapons
Ceasefire agreements
A safe and secure place to live
Stability in our community
To be able to return home
No interference in civilian government by the military



Law and justice

Freedom
Universal human rights
Rule of law
Police, soldiers and other public service personnel respect the public

Work and social welfare

Job opportunities

Financial stability

Being able to meet basic needs, like eating and clothing

Rich soil to grow crops

Access to good transport and to the towns

Social welfare

Good education

Good health and healthcare

Fair education that recognises history, culture and rights of ethnic minorities



Family and empathy

Being together with the family

Being supported by relatives

Being in a good relationship/marriage

Love

Compassion

Kindness

Trust between individuals and organisations



The Mano Dance as Symbol for Peace

“In the Kachin Mano Dance, everyone participates, without limitation of age, class, poor or rich.

The pangolin does not like to be in a group, it loves to be individual.

For the peaceful development of a country, this is not enough. All the people have to get involved, engage, and contribute so that it can be a Mano Dance celebrating peace.”



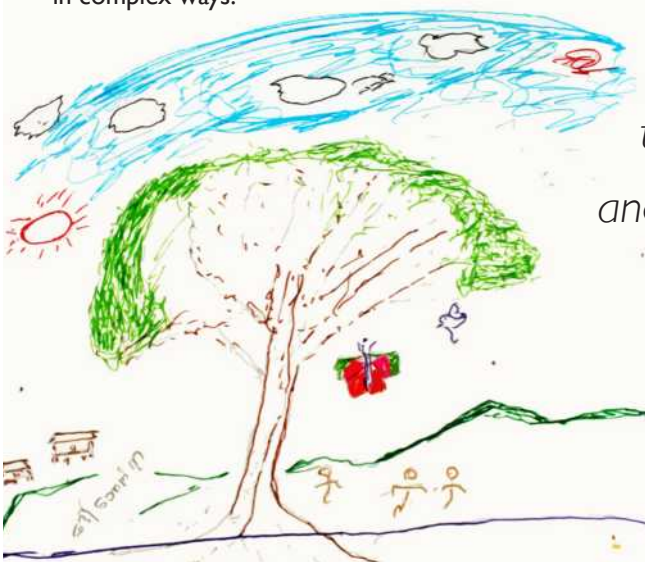
Who I am, or who I aim to be

Trees

"This is a tree, which represents you or me, which could provide safety and security to others, protect them from the storm, or calm them down and help them relax from their tiredness."

"A fruit-bearing tree at the bank of a stream gives shadow and fruits. I want to be somebody who can give peace to other people, and someone to depend on when they need."

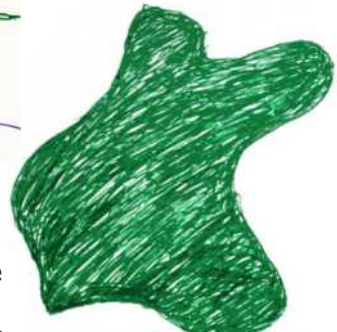
"I've symbolised myself as a big tree rooted at the bank of a river. The river represents organisations which are providing aid to us, the IDPs. [...] There is not only one tree, but also many other trees, bushes, small and big plants depending on the river. We are making our lives in complex ways."



"I am a big shady tree for family and relatives, children and generations, and those who are in trouble."

Gems

"I want to be someone who is invaluable like this giant jade stone; someone, whom everyone loves, and treasures; someone, who can change other people's life."



ယံကဝ် မိလ်ဒီ တုန်ဆိုးမိလ်မား
လှသော ကျေးဇူးမီးမီး၊ တုန်
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Umbrellas

"An umbrella protects you from the rain or the sun. This green umbrella represents myself. I am just alive. The black spots are holes to represent that I have struggled so much. Yet even though there is nothing in my life except being alive, I feel that I am still useful. I am still used by God. All the yellow umbrellas are my family members and my church members who I have been taking care of."

Rivers and Roads

"This is the river. The river is our lives, from where I can get joyfulness."

"I want to be somebody supportive or useful to others, like the express highway on which vehicles in different sizes travel."

"I want to be someone who is useful for all humans, like a road or a tree."



Weather and Landscape

"Getting cloudy is something to be happy with - when it rains, the soil gets wet and rich. Getting dark is something to be happy with - when the midnight is over, there will be the dawn."

Storm is scary - but even after a storm, the rain will stop and peace will come."

"I want to be a large plain surrounded by forests and mountains. Because such plain provides food for humans and other living beings."

Stories of civilians' self-organisation and unarmed protection from violence

“It was our village which became the first IDP Camp after that initial clash. The initial clash lasted just for a while, and things got back to normal. Instead, there were serious clashes in other places. To avoid those battles, it was possible to hide in the jungle.”

“Then we formed the organising committees, five persons in each team. The responsibility was to go around and motivate Kachin people to be united.”

“Finally, our village parson was contacted by the district-level secretary of the Kachin Baptist Association. They took action to build temporary camps. Civilians around the state capital who were affected by the armed clashes also found some possible temporary places, to stay away from those clashes. Kachin Baptist Convention churches allotted spaces for the refugees. They also tried to get in contact with NGOs.”

“Then the Kachin Army wanted me. The army supervisor saw I didn't want to serve them. So he helped me by giving me a position in the village administration committee so that the army could not get me to serve. He told me not to worry about the tasks and responsibilities because there were many elders including himself to advise me whenever I needed. This is how, at the age of 18, I became a village administrator.”

“Even though I am not a member of the IDP camp administration committee or otherwise in charge, I am often asked to counsel and troubleshoot, because I am someone who knows how to talk to military personnel or leaders.”

Art, education and peace work in Myanmar

- **Diverze Youth Art Platform:** <https://www.facebook.com/pg/TheDiverzes/about/>
- **Human Drama:** <https://www.britishcouncil.org.mm/programmes/arts/human-drama>
- **Arts for All Myanmar:** <https://www.myjusticemyanmar.org/partners/association-francois-xavier-bagnoud>
- **SweThaHar Organisation:** <https://www.swethahar.org>
- **UNESCO Myanmar (2017):** *Enacting a culture of peace: a peace education guide for adult learning in Myanmar:* https://works.bepress.com/tatsushi_arai/64/

Supporting nonviolent protection

- **Nonviolent Peaceforce Myanmar:** <https://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org/program-locations/myanmar>
- **Nyein (Shalom) Foundation Myanmar:** <http://www.nyeinfoundation.org>
- **Frontline Defenders Myanmar:** <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/location/burma>

Supporting IDPs and refugees

- **UNHCR Myanmar:** <https://www.unhcr.org/myanmar.html>
- **Danish Refugee Council Myanmar:** <https://drc.ngo/where-we-work/asia/myanmar>
- **Norwegian Refugee Council Myanmar:** <https://www.nrc.no/countries/asia/myanmar/>

Supporting children

- **UNICEF Myanmar:** <https://www.unicef.org/myanmar/>
- **Save the Children Myanmar:** <https://myanmar.savethechildren.net>
- **Plan International Myanmar:** <https://plan-international.org/myanmar>

Supporting women

- **UNFPA Myanmar:** <https://myanmar.unfpa.org/en>
- **Trocaire Myanmar:** <https://www.trocaire.org/whatwedo/wherewework/myanmar>
- **Gender and Development Institute Myanmar:**
<https://www.facebook.com/gdimyanmar/>

The history of conflict in Kachin and Myanmar

- **Research on the Kachin ceasefire 1994-2011:** <http://kachinceasefire.weebly.com>
- **The Asia Foundation - Peace and Conflict in Myanmar discussion papers:**
<https://asiafoundation.org/tag/peace-conflict-in-myanmar>
- **Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies Myanmar publications:**
<http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/tag/myanmar/>

The research team is not responsible for the content of these external websites or documents.

More information

Who are the people who created these drawings and spoke these words

The men and women who took part in this workshop describe painful experiences and moments of desperation, but their words and drawings also show that they are much more than these violent experiences.

They hold different roles in life. She is a caring mother. He is a father. He is single. He is a husband. She is separated. They have siblings. He is an only child. She never had to flee from war. They have moved around many times due to the violent conflict. She was quite well off once. His family was too poor to be able to live the life they wanted to.

They are all versatile and innovative in adapting to new life challenges. He is a voluntary teacher. She is an inventive business woman. He is a mechanic. She has traded a variety of goods. He has worked in a mine. He is a carpenter. She is interested in learning how to weave.

They care about their parents, spouses, siblings, children, in-laws, and neighbours. They have held different positions in their community. He is a priest. He has been a village administrator. He is good at counselling and troubleshooting in his IDP camp.

They have fears, skills and hopes. He is afraid of monkeys. He is very talented at painting with water colours. They all want a juster and more peaceful future, for themselves, their loved ones, their community and their nation.

Or as one member of our research team summarised:

“These people have had a very hard life, and they have been very strong to overcome all this. Once I understood them and their stories, I found they were very strong people, a kind of hero people. This was very moving, and I developed large respect for them.”



Happiness is...



"It has always been the happiest times for me when every family member could return home to spend time together."





This booklet presents the experiences of war and hopes for peace of ordinary women and men living their lives amidst violent conflict in Kachin state, Myanmar, using their own words and artwork.